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ABSTRACT

The need is present for children to "unlearn" to play in a competitive and unsupportive environment and to return to natural and cooperative ways of playing. The advantage of a noncompetitive play structure is that it provides ground where players practice interacting and speaking supportively and appreciatively to each other. Players are then able to extend this support to other parts of their lives. Persons are naturally cooperative until they are taught otherwise. And, in cooperative play experiences, individuals are encouraged to be spontaneous and to move outside of their social roles, so they can have real choices in their lives. Educating children to their own power and supporting them in specific cooperative activities enhances the quest for learning. Through these experiences, one sets realistic goals for behavior that utilizes democratic decision-making and a desire to improve rather than prove one's abilities. (Author/JMK)

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Learning in a Cooperative Play Community

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Learning in a Cooperative Play Community

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ABSTRACT

The need is present to unlearn to play in a competitive and unsupportive environment and to retrun to natural and cooperative ways of playing. The advantage of a noncompetitive play structure is that it provides ground where players practice interacting and speaking supportively and appreciatively to each other. Players are then able to extend this support to other parts of their lives. Persons are naturally cooperative until they are taught otherwise. And cooperative play experiences individuals are encouraged to be spontaneous and to move outside of their social roles so they can have real choices in their lives. Educating children to their own power and supporting them in specific cooperative activities enhances the quest for learning. Through these experiences one sets realistic goals for behavior which utilizes democratic decision - making and a desire to improve rather than prove one's abilities.

Learning in a Cooperative Play Community

Introduction Many societies find themselves in the biggest leisure boom ever as more people are participating in play activities, purchasing play equipment, and guarding their play time. Earlier retirements, jobsharing, time off the job, and feelings of freedom require leisure activities for respite and survival. The future of leisure defies imagination as it is changing constantly so concern should rest on the millions of children growing up in a leisure environment.

It is suggested that there is play that expresses the bodily impulses of the child; that precedes perception of the environment; that prepares the child for life; that enables the child to mix harmoniously with peers. In and out of play is a realization of the environment and its preparation of life. As early as children think of "life" at all, they may "play-train" themselves to fit into it. Group games are played in early years and it is often the only form of children's play which is carried forward to form a major element of adult life. (Lowenfield)

Behavioral scientists are also studying the animal behavior of young mammals at play. They suggest that play is exercise, practice for adult activities, social interaction, and assessment of other animals - all of which is learning. Young animals are the most frequent players, and they are the ones most in need of motor, cognitive, and social skills. Poirer, an anthropologist at Ohio State University, indicates that those species who need to learn the most play the most. In the higher primates, includ-

ing humans, most if not all the behavior is learned behavior so they may have to play a good deal in order to learn the behaviors they'll need in later life. (Ford)

Tomorrow's play will remain a significant avenue through which children prepare for adulthood. Freedom, exploration, discovery and creativity - words which describe the play behavior of children around the world - suggest that the process of play is intrinsically linked with the development and learning of children. Research also supports the importance of play in contributing to children's physical, psychological, and social development (Bowers). The need is present to unlearn to play in a competitive and unsupportive environment and to return to natural and cooperative ways of playing.

Background In cooperative social situations the goals of the participants are so linked together that there is a positive correlation between their goal attainments (Deutsch, 1962). Under pure cooperative conditions, an individual can obtain their goal if and only if the others with whom they are linked can obtain their goals (Johnson, 1970). An example of this cooperative relationship is a group trying the Lap Game (Fluegelman); its goal is to have all members of the group sit on one another's lap at the same time by offering support to each other and not falling on the ground.

A goal structure specifies the type of interdependence existing among participants. It specifies the ways in which participants will relate to each other and to the leader in working toward the accomplishment of the learning goals. When individuals

are playing together to undo a Knots configuration (Fluegelman), they are in a cooperative goal structure. A cooperative goal structure exists when participants perceive that they can obtain their goal if, and only if, the other participants with whom they are linked can obtain their goal (Deutsch, 1949). Since the goal of all the group members is to help each other come out of the Knot without breaking hands, the goal of all the participants has been reached when they naturally form a circle. A cooperative goal structure requires the coordination of behavior necessary to achieve the mutual goal. If one group member achieves the goal, all the group members with whom they are linked achieve the goal. (Johnson and Johnson).

From the structure of cooperation it follows that when any individual behaves in such a way as to increase their chances of goal attainment, they increase the chances that the other members of the group will also achieve their goals. Deutsch (1962) states that the psychological consequences of such interactions are: 1. substitutability - the actions of members in a cooperative relationship are interchangeable; 2. positive effectualness - the actions of one member in a cooperative relationship moving the other members of the group toward their goal; and 3. inducibility - members of a cooperative relationship are receptive to the individual moving them towards their goal and also will facilitate those actions.

Cooperative interaction is a biological necessity for humans (Mead, 1934; Asch, 1952; Deutsch, 1962, Bruner, 1966; Johnson, 1973). There is a deep human need to respond to others and to operate jointly with them toward mutual goals: this kind of interaction has

always been absolutely necessary for the survival of every individual member of our species. No person would survive the first hour, of the first few years of life without cooperative interactions with others, and no group or society would exist without massive cooperation among members. Without cooperation, no family, group, organization, or society would exist. Cooperative interaction with others is essential for the development of trust, self-confidence, goal-setting, personal identity, and cognitive development, which are the foundation for a person's mental health (Johnson, 1974; Johnson and Matross, 1975). No aspect of human experience is more important than cooperative interactions with others (Johnson and Johnson).

Johnson and Johnson (1974) concentrated especially on delineating the destructive consequences of competition on children's growth and development. Anxiety, fear of failure, hostility toward competitors, concern with preventing others from winning as opposed to developing intrinsic motivations, and, more generally, self-orientation and a sense of values that emphasizes winning above else have been documented as attendant features of competitive motivations. Equally overwhelming is the evidence for positive interpersonal relationships that develop in cooperative conditions: increases in friendliness, helpfulness, supportiveness, attentiveness, respectfulness, responsibility to members, and a general attitude of openness and trust, or what Slavin (1977) calls "the building of social connectedness" (Pepitone).

Perhaps society or our immediate environment can be represented with cooperation and non-cooperation in the following models. (Figures 1, 2, 3)

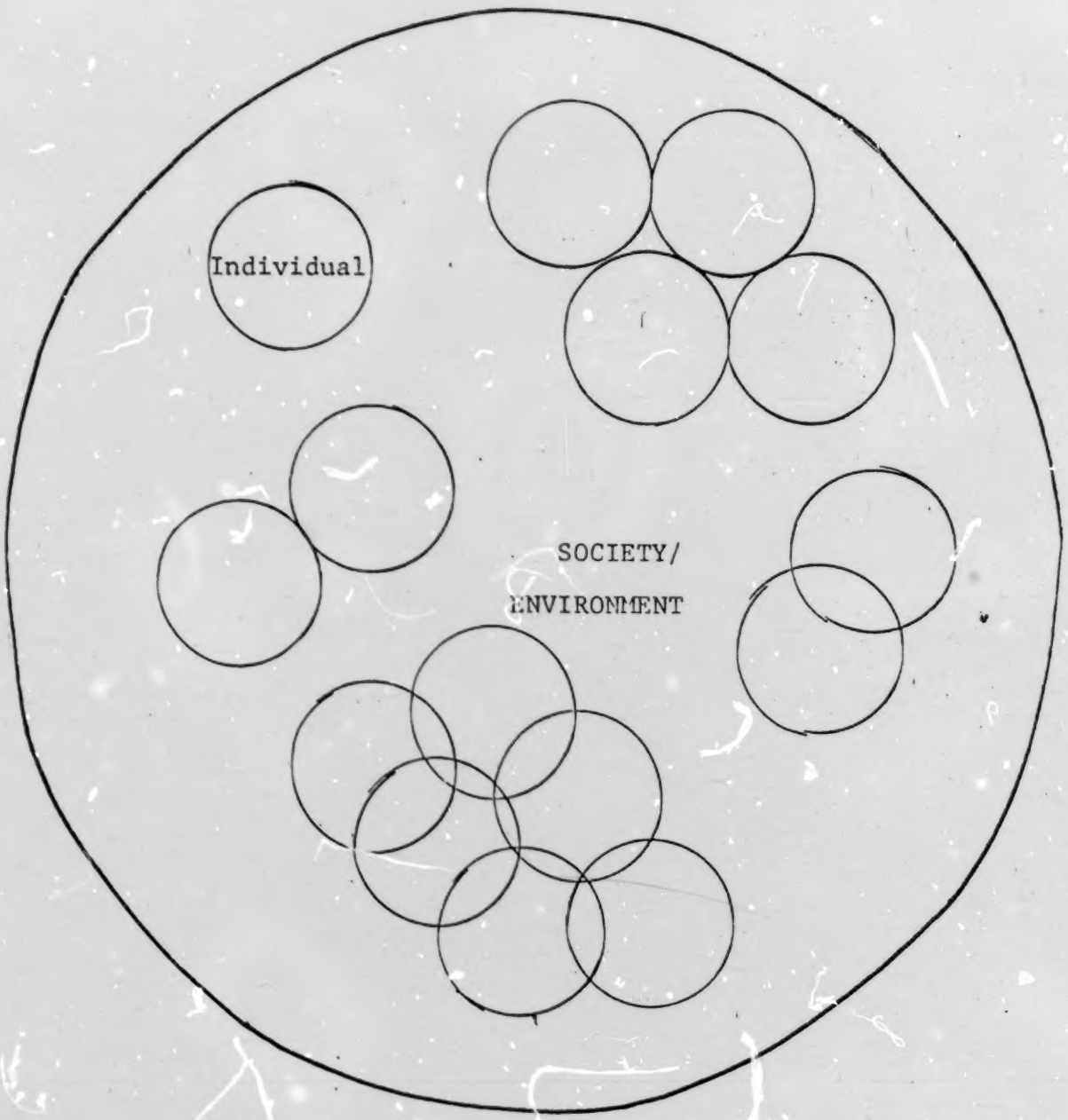

Figure 1

Society/Immediate Environment

With Individual Life Development

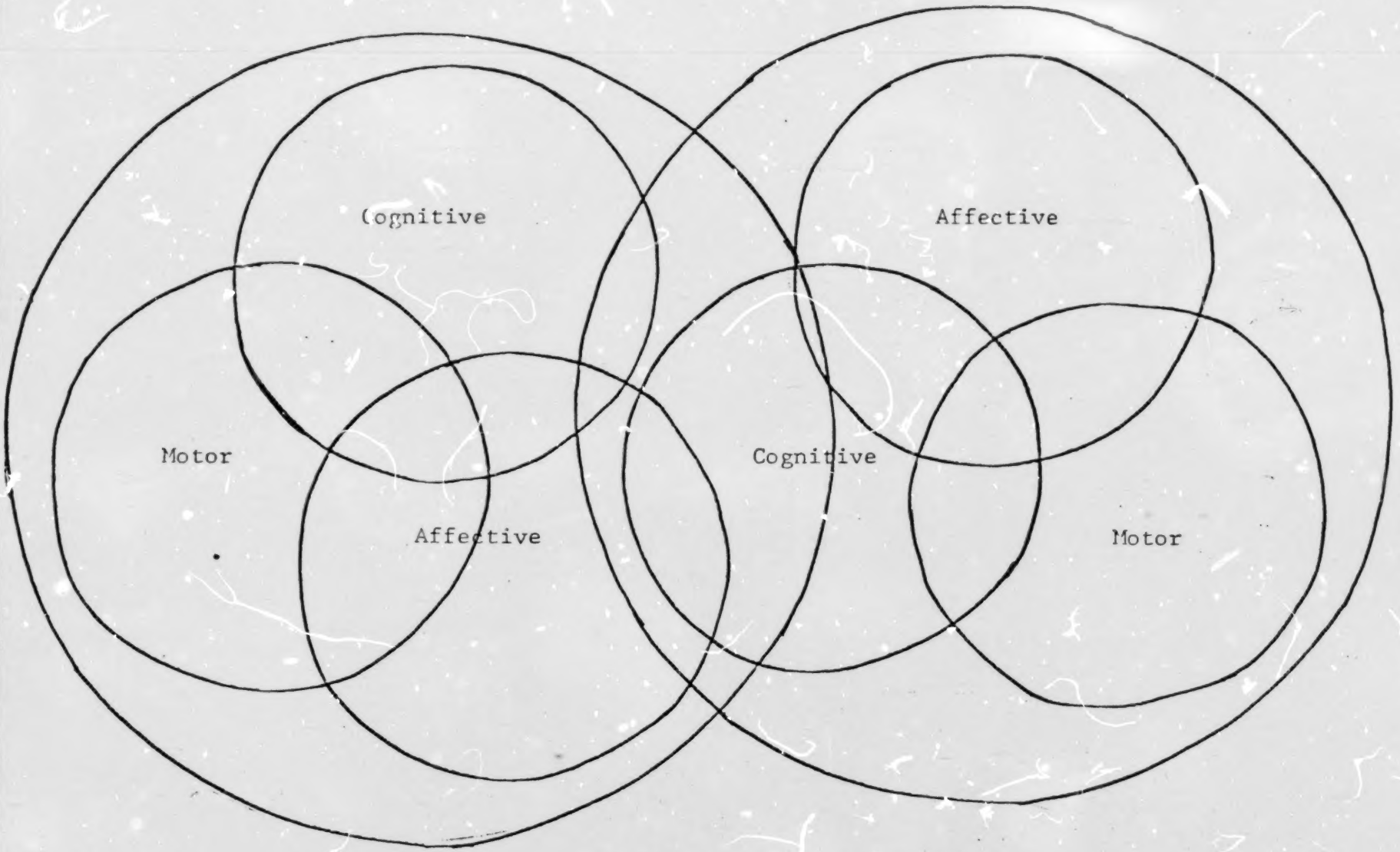

Figure 2

Development of Two Individuals in

Cooperative Play

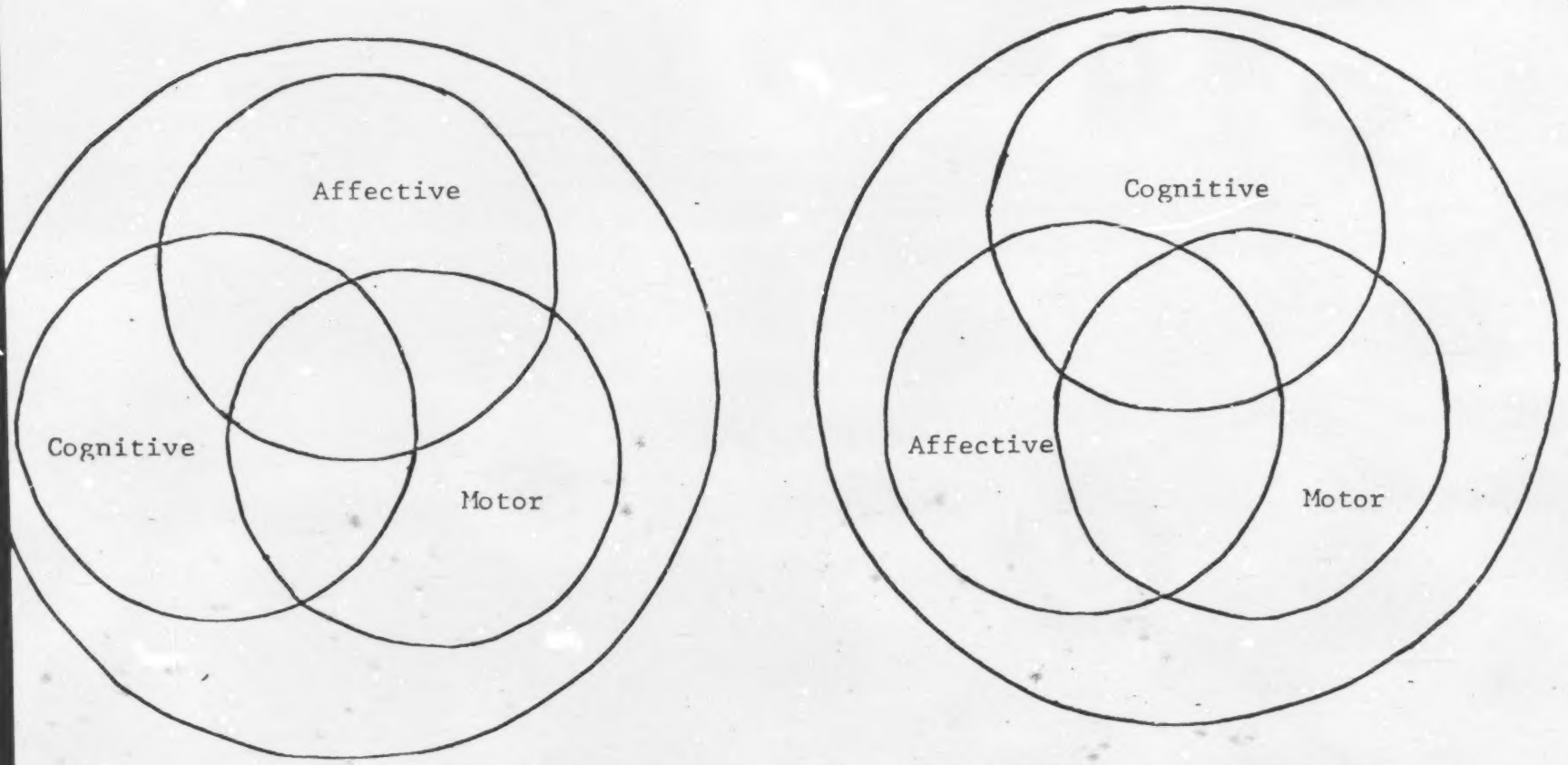

Figure 3

Development of Two Individuals in a

Noncooperative Play Environment

Application Cooperative play environments will promote interpersonal processes that will generally improve the quality of life and increase the enjoyment and satisfaction of both the leader and the participants. The more the participants like each other, the more they communicate effectively with each other; the higher the trust, influence, acceptance, support, sharing, helping, emotional involvement, and utilizations of each other's resources, the more the coordination of effort; and the more the divergent and the risk-taking thinking, the more learning takes place, and the more positive are the affective and cognitive outcomes of the play experience.

Equally important to the traditional emphasis of learning is the teaching of cooperative problem-solving skills needed for the retention, application, and transfer of information. No effective problem-solving can take place without some amount of creativity. Creativity is not a characteristic of a person but rather the result of certain types of interaction among individuals (Johnson and Johnson). The ability to engage in divergent thinking, to take risks in solving problems, and to engage in open controversy are all aspects of creative interaction. The ability to identify one's abilities and apply them in problem-solving situations is an important cognitive outcome. The development of the ability to take the perspective of other individuals within a situation is a necessary prerequisite for the learning social adjustment, communication ability, and skills, empathy and sympathy, and autonomous moral judgement based upon mutual reciprocity and justice.

Several social scientists have stated that the most pressing need in our society of organized complexity and constant change is for persons who are skilled in being human; for persons who can feel and express warmth, trust, caring, openess, compassion, altruism, and other aspects of "humaness". One set of important affective outcomes are the feelings, attitudes, and values necessary for humane interaction among individuals, including the interpersonal and group skills needed to form and maintain humanizing relationships (Johnson and Johnson). Other areas of affective outcomes include: valuing a pluralistic, democratic society within which there is freedome of choice and equity of opportunity; promoting the acceptance and appreciation of cultural, ethnic, and individual differences and a reduction of prejudice and bias; accepting learning as a source of excitement, interest, enjoyment and satisfaction, the perception and attitudes of oneself as valuable, acceptable, competent, and able to affect one's life; psychological health; and the development of the capacity for feeling a variety of emotions at wide levels of intensity.

Conclusion. Noncompetitive activities do need to be structured to provide a transition from competitive conditioning that is prevalent in today's society. The advantage of a cooperative play structure is that it provides ground where players practice interacting and speaking supportively and appreciatively to each other. Players are then able to extend this support to other parts of their lives. Games are also a language which may help people to connect and learn from each other.

Persons are naturally cooperative until they are taught otherwise. There is no minimum or maximum number of participants for cooperative play experience but rather a natural grouping conducive to the experience. Individuals are encouraged to be spontaneous and to move outside of their social roles so they can have real choices in their lives. Educating children to their own power and supporting them in specific cooperative activities enhances the quest for learning. Through these experiences one sets realistic goals for behavior which utilizes democratic decision-making and a desire to improve rather than prove one's abilities.

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